

Eastern Regional Mental Health Board, Inc.

The citizen's voice in mental health policy.

DANGER, NOT DIAGNOSIS

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The Eastern Regional Mental Health Board and NAMI-CT support your efforts to keep guns out of the hands of the wrong people. However, the “wrong people” are those who have shown that they are dangerous by committing violent acts in their past, not simply people who have a mental illness or who have been hospitalized in the past.

People may be hospitalized for many reasons, including grave disability, which means the inability to care for oneself, for example by not having food in the refrigerator or not dressing adequately for the weather. These are usually very short-lived situations and people like this are usually back home in short order. This small subset of people with mental illness is usually too disorganized to do something violent. Some people—though I hope fewer than in the past-- are even committed to or kept in a hospital for the convenience of their treaters.

Moreover, there are many conditions that are more often associated with violence than mental illness. Alcohol is involved in most fights and assaults, yet no one suggests banning drinkers from owning guns. People with anger management problems, veterans returning from war, and people going through divorce or other life changes are all at greater risk for violence, yet they are not in this bill. Perhaps a ninety day embargo on gun possession for people losing their jobs would reduce the toll of workplace violence, but no one is proposing that.

Because of the spurious association between Newtown and mental illness, we talk of increasing restrictions on people with mental illnesses. People assume that anyone who *does* something crazy must *be* crazy. Adam Lanza does not seem to have had a mental illness, and he was certainly never committed to a hospital, yet laws like this will make some people think they are doing something.

Bills like HB 6162 assume that mental illness is a constant and uniform thing. In fact, people with the same diagnosis differ widely and more importantly, they often become more stable and productive over time. I have no problem with a two year look-back for this kind of regulation, but I do care about stigma that does not fade even as one learns to manage the illness and live productively. Please do not add to the burden of living with a mental illness while ignoring much riskier conditions that are harder to define, all in the name of making our streets safer.